

Andrea Virginás, *Cultural studies approaches in the study of Eastern European Cinema: Spaces, Bodies, Memories*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2016, ISBN 978-1-4438-0059-4, 301 p.

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Cultural Studies Approaches in the Study of Eastern European Cinema represents the materialization of a moment that started in 2014 with the 12th conference of the European Society for the Study of English/ESSE, which took place in Slovakia. As the editor, Andrea Virginás, participated in a panel named “The use of Cultural Studies Approaches in the Study of Eastern European Cinema”, she was suggested the idea of a possible volume on that topic. Hence, the book under review is a collection of 12 case studies of post-1989 national cinemas such as Croatian, Hungarian, Polish, Serbian, Slovakian, Slovenian and Romanian. The Eastern European film and cinema are generally subsumed within a postcolonial reading of the New Wave Cinema. Using this postcolonial framework the authors rethink national cinematic canon and present the various aspects of the “spatial”, the “bodily” and the “memory turn” as represented on screen.

The articles work on a double concern; on the one hand, they follow the common aspects of the post-communism in the Eastern Europe area through which they create a transnational identity. On the other hand, not only do they explore the post-communism background but they simultaneously investigate the degrees of the transnational cinema as they are located within the postcolonial canon, according to Anikó Imre’s explanations:

Since 1989, the division between high and popular culture has blurred rapidly, further clarifying the economic underpinnings of cultural production. From the ruins of state-run film industries, cash-strapped Eastern Europe has emerged as an indispensable site

for a transnational rearrangement, offering a cheap resource of production and a new consumer market.

The present volume has a leading chapter followed by a tripartite structure that investigates, as the title suggests, the space, the body and the memory. The leading chapter, written by Anikó Imre, expresses fundamental concerns about postcolonial identity since postcolonial cinema becomes a postmodern mosaic. Seeking the identity of postcolonial studies, the author gives three examples of postcolonialism in the matter of cinema culture. The first one regards the postsocialist television (e.g. the early socialist historical adventure series) as a considerable material for a postcolonial study. Secondly, she suggests the dissident art films that use the socialist ideas and representations as exotic merchandise for the Western cultures. This is what the author calls “a paradoxical postcolonial function of the Eastern European artists and intellectuals”. The last aspect that she approaches resides in the cultural racism, where the role of Eastern intellectuals as post-colonialism promoters follows a double path: the one of the universal cosmopolitanism and the parochial nationalism one. Therefore, the author raises awareness upon the importance of the variety of cultural practices and proposes a comparative geopolitical view. Moreover, she clarifies the perspective upon post-colonialism and the conflicts of cultural belonging that deal with these issues, stating that the term should be considered in relation to post-socialism: the project of postcolonializing post-socialism can only be effective if we refresh the standard conceptual and methodological toolkit of postcolonial studies.

The first section of the book entitled “Postcolonial, Post-socialist Spaces (of the Nation)”, directly examines the way in which avatars of spaces appear in postcolonial cinema. The articles comprised here are written by authors such as Zsolt Györi, Jana Dudková, Andrea Virginás and Edward Alexander. The opening study, *Concrete Utopias: Discourses of Domestic Space in Hungarian Cinema* belongs to Zsolt Györi, who illustrates the significant stages or events in the development of domestic space by discussing the genealogy of concrete buildings.

Panel buildings, symbolic promises of a new life, soon came to signify the failure of these promises and became permanent homes for dwellers who were no longer idealistic travelers but hopeless prisoners.

He sees the cinema as an important and authentic source in examining spatialization. Hence, space, as a construct in Hungarian Cinema, has the power of highlighting a social phenomenon such as the socialist episteme.

On the matter of space, Jana Dudková's article is based on the concept of the supermodern place, the *non-place* or *non-lieu* in millennial Slovak cinema giving film examples such as *It will stay between us* (2004), *Two syllables behind* (2005) or *Caught in between* (2014). The scholar shows how places lose their authenticity in post 1989 Slovak cinema through the imagery of the non-place. That is a space that she describes as a place where life collapses, where feelings of solitude and alienation become more intense. As a result, once with the development of the supermodern space she notices „a rupture in the human experience”.

Andrea Virginás in her *Fragile Diegetic Spaces and Mobile Women: Coping with Trauma in Hungarian and Romanian Films* focuses on Romanian Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* (2007) and on Szabolcs Hajdu's *Bibliothèque Pascal* (2010). The examined films show the impossibility of creating a coherent narrative space when the characters' mind is still affected by past traumas. Additionally, she remarks a common strategy among Eastern European countries in managing the historical traumatic experiences. Therefore, she argues that in these cases silence is the preferred method of coping with trauma. However, she sheds light upon an interesting aspect of this struggle; that heroines of the above mentioned movies have become so much means of translating past traumas. Women who revisit the place of their traumatic experience do not even speak as the space itself seems to speak for them. Because there is great tendency to revive the socialist past into a post-socialist present she concludes that. In post-2000 Hungarian and Romanian films, this seems to be achieved through systematically placing traumatized women into incoherent diegetic spaces.

Furthermore, the concept of space is seen from a national perspective by Edward Alexander, who analyses the so called Yugosphere. In his paper, the author follows the phenomenon of the self promoting film as a national narrative and he focuses on two case studies: Damjan Kozole's *Slovenian Girl* (2009) and Srđan Spasojević's *A Serbian film* (2010). Both of them show nationhood in their titles, a

tactic that automatically sets a theoretical boundary between the national self and the national others.

In the process of reinterpreting space in post-1989 Eastern cinema, the first section presents different perspectives of examining the cultural usage of space such as the utopic space, the non-place, the incoherent space or the strongly nationalized space. All of these work as present expressions of the past socialist traumas.

As it follows, the second section of the volume continues with the body representations on screen, based on specific Hungarian and Romanian films. György Kalmár in *Apostate bodies: Nimród Antal's Kontroll and Eastern European Identity politics* presents the film as a means of exploring the political discourse. *Control* (2003) was shot in Budapest's underground and explores the imagery of bodies in pain, of bodies that lack control in spaces where the laws work differently:

In the subway we are all vulnerable: maybe we try to exercise control over our lives in most situations – we lock the bike in front of the supermarket, we do not travel with drunk drivers, and we check the date of expiry of the food we buy – yet in the metro we are left to the goodwill of our fellow citizens.

One of the most striking elements of the body politics the author observes is that almost all of the main characters are men. However, they are not idealized, but pictured in pain. Resonating with this article, Eszter Ureczky discusses the body of pain in the context of Ágnes Kocsis' *Pál Adrienn* (2010). Boundaries of the self and the world become homogenous, the body changes through eating and it extends in space as the stomach itself becomes a metaphor of the inside and of the outside.

Katalin Sándor takes as his critical premise the understanding that, in a continuous renegotiation of space, bodies become “living pictures”. In his article, *Bibliothèque Pascal* comes into discussion through the concept of corporeality. The film presents a heroine sold as a slave in a surreal adventure that allows people to project and enter each other's dreams. The boundary between the real and the unreal is suspended in the film while bodies take the form of the *tableaux vivants* which along with tableau-compositions in cinema can function as intermedial figures in which the filmic, the painterly, the theatrical and the corporeal fold into each other, mediating between stillness and movement, animate and inanimate, artifice and body.

Questioning the real and representing it at the limit of the unreal hides a more powerful meaning represented by the deeply ideological foundation that lays here. The socialist episteme is strongly suggested here through this game with the instances of reality.

Mihaela Ursa's case study draws attention to the last fifty years of Romanian cinema in order to examine the ever-shifting faces of the last decades' motherhood. Through the lens of communist and post-communist society, Romanian mothers have always been a public issue, but, as reflected in post 1989 Romanian film industry, most of them turned out to be negative characters. For example, the scholar discusses the intergenerational mother-daughter conflict in films such as *First of all, Felicia* (2009), *I'm a communist hag* (2013), and *Child's Pose* (2013), where mothers are toxic figures because of their tendency to substitute maternal love with material investments. However, what is shocking in Mihaela Ursa's study is the social phenomenon she reveals along with the film that she analyzes. The statistics show an increasing number of parents emigrating abroad to make much money while the child is left behind, an aspect that has a great impact not only on a social level but on a cultural one as well.

The motherland, as the national state is designated in Romanian language, and not only, does not take good care of her children anymore: this might be the over-script of the latest films depicting mothers.

These four case studies feature the way in which each author successfully pulls together seemingly heterogeneous contributions that provide a withstanding overview of the corporeal body in Hungarian and Romanian post-socialist cinema.

The last section, dedicated to the topic of cultural memory, encompasses articles whose authors explore questions on this issue in correlation with the New Wave Cinema. Elżbieta Durys's opening paper focuses on the matter of memory and its linking with truth in *Aftermath* (2012). She mentions Aleida Assmann's modes of memories, "a functional one" and "a storage one", where the first one is the social memory and the second one works as a background for it. These processes are illustrated through the film characters (the Kalina brothers) that reactivate the information collected in the storage memory. This will bring changes in memory

structure and the “functional memory, which is the basis for a community’s identity” is depicted as a lie.

Around the aspects of cultural memory, Claudiu Turcuş underlines the depth of an ideological acceptance of the post-1989 Romanian cinema. The author talks about the anti-communism discourse’s legacy in cinema based on Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. Claudiu Turcuş identifies the transnational moment as he opens a discussion for further research upon the subject of World Cinema (inspired by David Damrosch’s paper on World Literature). National approaches study work, therefore, in a new way towards a global contextualization. He predicts upon the direction of the new Romanian cinema that might follow a self-referential path or a political-historical one. Examples are given for both sides; the risk is that in time the subject of communism might become obsolete.

The overarching aspect of the fall of the Iron Curtain becomes in Katarína Mišíková’s article the starting point in presenting the critical condition of film industry in post 1989 Slovak Cinema. She perceives film production as a process of constant returns since the last 25 years of Slovak cinema productions were inspired in the sixties through a so-called recycling method. She also mentions the German professor Aleida Assman when it comes to describe the close relation between identity and memory especially because the disjointed development of post 1989 Slovak Cinema can be explained through memory studies.

There is nothing surprising in the fact that Eastern Europe cinemas are trying to find a point of entry common enough for the transnational context. However, coping with the external pressure from the international film markets, Romanian film producers may break the *New Wave Canon* or build it. Doru Pop, therefore, proceeds in examining how recent Romanian film productions approach the cinematic canonization. Looking at the recent cinema policy making, the author notices the producers’ endeavour in finding new ways of expression that differ from the actual canon. As he states, the main rule for entering the *New Wave* is to avoid the direct political implications, a key which, for example, Radu Jude’s *Aferim!* (2015) doesn’t to follow. An interesting fact is represented by that “transnational turn” the author mentions since films as *Love Building* (2013) or *Miss Christina* (2013) are designed for Western exportation. The culturally distinct element is lost while trying to fit into

the international market, the international community they are addressed to. As he talks about ways of breaking and creating the canon, the author ends his article by giving a list of his personal top ten favourite films that would be properly associated with the Romanian New Wave canon.

All in all, these scholars avoid well-trodden critical paths, presenting new perspectives of the transnational element through the national cinema. Despite the differences, there is a cross-fertilization of these authors' ideas. Therefore, the main methodological innovation of this volume consists in its approach to the sources. By broadening the canon of national cinemas to the transnational market, this collection of articles comes at a time when there is growing interest in cultural global integration. Even though the influence of postcolonial studies is mostly discussed in the background of cultural representations, the volume takes an innovative turn under the umbrella term of transnational approach, leaving the area open for further research.